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**Guatemalan Diasporic Fiction as Refugee Literature: An Analysis of  
Héctor Tobar's *The Tattooed Soldier* and Tanya Maria Barrientos's  
*Family Resemblance***

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Héctor Tobar's *The Tattooed Soldier* and Tanya Maria Barrientos's  
*Family Resemblance***

**by**

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**Report**

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## **Dedication**

To those who left and those who stayed.

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And finally, to my family, who instilled in me a love of reading and learning and who have always believed in my dreams.

## **Abstract**

### **Guatemalan Diasporic Fiction as Refugee Literature: An Analysis of Héctor Tobar's *The Tattooed Soldier* and Tanya Maria Barrientos's *Family Resemblance***

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2014

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Despite a large influx of Guatemalans to cities such as Los Angeles and Washington, D.C., their narrative has largely been subsumed in the traditional Latino/a immigrant narrative. The importance of the historical specificity and traumatic nature of Guatemalan immigration, as a consequence of the Central American revolutions, has only now begun to be studied by scholars such as Arturo Arias and Claudia Milian, though the field of Latino/a studies is still largely focused on immigrants from Mexico, Cuba, and Puerto Rico. Thus, through an examination of two novels by Guatemalan-American authors, Héctor Tobar's *The Tattooed Soldier* (1998/2000) and Tanya Maria Barrientos' *Family Resemblance* (2003), I compare how each novel differently positions Guatemalan diasporic identity around traumas surrounding the Guatemalan civil war and diaspora. Ultimately, I argue that Tobar establishes Guatemalan diasporic fiction as a kind of refugee literature, while Barrientos attempts to fit the Guatemalan diasporic narrative into a traditional Latino/a immigrant narrative using the genre of chica lit, thus flattening out the unique historical experience of the Guatemalan civil war while also highlighting the constraints of the chica lit genre for Central American-American women writers.

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## Guatemalan Diasporic Fiction as Refugee Literature

### INTRODUCTION

Los Angeles makes you less than you were back home.... Everyone took a step down, but Antonio had dropped further than most because he carried the unbearable burden of what he had seen at his house in San Cristóbal so many years ago. His Guatemalan memories were a bloodstained cloth that hung over him just as the rain-soaked roof hung over him now, threatening to collapse and inundate him. (Tobar, *Tattooed Soldier* 51-52)

The shot looks like something that might have appeared in *Life* magazine, a perfect portrait of that tidy and tailored era, a scene so universal that it could have been any couple anywhere. But this couple happened to be my parents, and the wedding happened to be in Guatemala, a tiny nation in such turmoil that before I was born my parents had to flee. They never told me the full story of why they packed their things and left their friends and family for good.... I'm hypnotized by the scenes in the album, drawn so deeply into a world I've pieced together in my imagination... (Barrientos, *Family Resemblance* 16)

This project begins from a personal place; as the daughter of a Guatemalan immigrant who experienced the internal armed conflict<sup>1</sup> (1960-1996), Guatemala has never been just a tiny country south of Mexico to me. For the authors whose works I examine, this connection to Guatemala and the traumatic civil war<sup>2</sup> is also personal. Héctor Tobar, the author of *The Tattooed Soldier* (1998/2000), considered by Arturo Arias to be the first Guatemalan-American novel in English, dedicates the work to his parents, “two travelers among thousands in the Guatemalan diaspora.” The novel asks:

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<sup>1</sup> The Guatemalan civil war began soon after the CIA-backed coup of Jacobo Arbenz in 1954. It is marked by government repression and violence justified by the rise of leftist guerrilla groups and labor movements. 1975-1985 was the period of greatest violence in the country, including the government's scorched earth policy which razed over 400 villages. The majority of the violence was perpetrated against indigenous Mayans. Los Acuerdos de Paz (the Peace Accords) were signed between the URNG (primary guerrilla group) and Guatemalan government in 1996.

<sup>2</sup> I will refer to the period of 1960-1996 as “civil war” and “armed conflict” interchangeably. *El conflicto armado interno* is used when publications (such as *Prensa Libre*) talk about the period, but I feel this is also used in the same way that the Vietnam “conflict” is used – to downplay the idea that this was a war (whether officially or not).



How does one work through the traumas of the Guatemalan civil war in the United States? Tanya Maria Barrientos ascribes the desire to write her novel, *Family Resemblance* (2003), to “want[ing] to write a novel about a character coming to terms with a family history she didn’t really realize would affect her so deeply” (“A Conversation”). *Family Resemblance* is a fictional world based on Barrientos’ imagined answer to the question: Why did my parents immigrate to the United States from Guatemala?

*The Tattooed Soldier* and *Family Resemblance* represent different manifestations of traumas as the “*crisis of death* and the correlative *crisis of life*” (Caruth 7). These stories focus on living in a present that must constantly interact with the historical traumas of the and the refugee narratives of the Guatemalan diaspora. As evident in the first epigraph, Antonio must find a way to live with the murder of his wife and child. He is haunted by two murders that he never witnessed; he only sees the aftermath and must reconstruct the story. His reconstruction clearly places his own failures (both in Guatemala and Los Angeles) at the center of the memory: “The feeling of being responsible for their deaths had only grown stronger over the years, with each new Los Angeles failure” (*Tattooed Soldier* 52). His experience as an immigrant<sup>3</sup> in Los Angeles is continually tied to his loss<sup>4</sup>, as a justification for his lowered status. The narrator compares Antonio’s homelessness with the burden of two traumas: his family’s murder

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<sup>3</sup> Which is, interestingly, only examined once he is in the United States. That is, he does not explain the immigration process of crossing the Guatemala-Mexico border and the Mexico-US border. In this way, he differs greatly from other Guatemalan refugee narratives, such as *El Norte* (1983) where the trip to the United States is the center of the story.

<sup>4</sup> I use the terms absence and loss with full knowledge of Dominick LaCapra’s reflections on absence versus loss in “Trauma, Absence, Loss” in *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (2001).

and his absence at the traumatizing event. Through the metaphor of the ‘bloodstained cloth,’ the narrator portrays Antonio as someone who has been thoroughly soaked in the trauma of his loss and refugee status to the point where he sees his identity and place in society as a consequence. This conclusion is further supported by the comparison of Antonio’s memories (as blood-stained cloth) to the hastily-constructed roof of his shack; both hang over his head, flimsy and fragile, a sign of his impending breaking point. Though Antonio feels weighed down by the postcolonial traumas of Guatemala which forced his immigration, Los Angeles is also where he can “redeem himself” since he believes that he is responsible for the murder of his family (51).

The epigraph from *Family Resemblance* locates the trauma differently and more abstractly. The main character (Nita) looks at a snapshot from her parents’ wedding album, using these images as a means to “piece together” the story of her parents’ migration. Just like Antonio in *The Tattooed Soldier*, Nita’s family “had to flee,” leaving behind not only relations but also a culture that they were afraid to bring with them. Their attempt to offer a simple response, merely that “the government was crazy,” is not enough to suppress the effects her parents’ direct experience of the trauma has on Nita’s indirect experience of it. More importantly, Nita’s description of her parents’ wedding as the same as anyone else’s in that era is then undermined by the historical specificity of its occurrence – in a politically-divided, unstable country being used a pawn in the Cold War struggle between capitalism and communism.

Although both *The Tattooed Soldier* and *Family Resemblance* take place primarily in the United States, their plot and protagonists are driven by traumas

experienced in Guatemala during the civil war period as well as the refugee experience of Antonio and Nita's parents, as is clear from these initial close readings. In this paper, I argue that the perspectives offered about the traumas of post-coup Guatemala and *la violencia* and the representation of those traumas through the use of literary devices differ greatly between both novels. Tobar fictionalizes real events in a way that takes into account the complexity of the civil war and the people involved by offering three very different viewpoints in depth. Tobar portrays a more nuanced, if heavily male-focused narrative which recognizes the humanity of the perpetrators and also the vengeful nature of the victims. Through his exploration of the nature of national trauma and its effects, Tobar explores not only "the second-largest city of Guatemala" (Los Angeles) but also ladino society in Guatemala (Arias 184). Ultimately, he inaugurates a tradition of Guatemalan diasporic literature that reflects the historical experience of being a refugee; this challenges the traditional Latino/a immigrant narrative.

On the other hand, Barrientos' story spends most of its time avoiding Guatemala, its history presented as a lecture rather than an experience. The novel's partial adherence to the "chica lit" genre, an ethnic spin-off of the chick lit and the book club romance, offers few viewpoints of post-coup Guatemala and the armed conflict and those it does offer are incomplete. The convoluted storyline privileges the few: the upper-class movers and shakers of the coup and the burgeoning civil war. What about the bystanders who had no say in the actions of the government or the revolutionaries? While this offers a novel ripe for a reading concerned with the loss of historical memory, it also reads like a

*telenovela*. Barrientos ends up romanticizing the trauma of the civil war<sup>5</sup> to produce a simplified story which perpetuates the belief that the civil war was only experienced by leftist guerillas and right-wing government oppressors and tellingly leaves out the place of *indígenas* (the primary victims) and ladino bystanders in this postcolonial trauma. Barrientos' story, with her assertion of a Guatemalan identity by the end, becomes dangerously close to betraying her family history by unfairly representing that history. As Crystal Parikh cautions, "cultural workers cannot be satisfied with the production of narratives of minority lives but must inquire into the conditions of the production of those narratives, in order to understand the way in which the knowledge offered in this process might at once authorize and betray the subjects it is meant to represent" (250). However, Barrientos's novel is also subversive of certain market forces of works by Latinas. She offers the reader a narrative dominated by female characters. "Chica lit," as defined by Tace Hedrick, focuses on the path to Americanization. Barrientos undermines and inverts this trope. While Barrientos' adherence to aspects of the chica lit genre flattens that Guatemalan diasporic experience by attempting to fit into chica lit and the traditional Latino/a immigrant narrative, she also creates a novel which advocates a reclamation of roots through more than just romance.

#### **PUBLICATION HISTORY AND CONTEXT**

Both of these works were published before the serendipitous discovery of the Archivo Histórico de la Policía Nacional (AHPN) in 2005, whose 80 million documents have been used to help find *los desaparacidos* (the disappeared) and fight impunity

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<sup>5</sup> David Stoll refers to a similar phenomenon called "romancing the revolution," though he talks about it in the context of liberal academics and other guerrilla sympathizers (277).

within the country, as demonstrated by the recent trial of former President José Efraín Ríos Montt for crimes against humanity and genocide.<sup>6</sup> Though the AHPN documents were not available to Barrientos or Tobar at the time, there were other important publications being made available to the public right around the publication of their novels. For example, the Catholic Church-backed Recovery of Historical Memory (Recuperación de la Memoria Histórica, or REMHI) truth commission, followed closely by Bishop Juan Gerardi's murder in April of 1998<sup>7</sup> (two days after the report's publication), and the UN-backed Historical Clarification Commission's (Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico, or CEH) 4,400-page final report published in 12 volumes in February 1999 were available around the time of the publication of both works. Both the REMHI and CEH assert that indigenous Guatemalans accounted for 83% of the victims of the civil war and that 93% of the atrocities committed during the conflict had been the work of the Guatemalan armed forces (as opposed to 4% attributed to the guerrillas).

Few documents were available to validate the truths embedded in these works before the REMHI and CEH. Indeed, the CEH was not available in any substantial English edition until 2012.<sup>8</sup> Thus, these novels may provide readers with their first contact with the history of the Guatemalan civil war. In addition, these works specifically

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<sup>6</sup> As of the writing of this work, Ríos Montt was found guilty and then had his sentence annulled. Human rights groups, particularly CALDH, have been fighting to reinstate the sentencing. Hearings to determine if the trial proceedings will resume were held on 26 March 2014 but no ruling has been handed down yet.

<sup>7</sup> Gerardi's murder was a terrible blow to fighting impunity in Guatemala. He headed the REMHI, specifically because many feared that the UN-backed CEH would not represent the truth, since it was set on the Guatemalan Army's terms. However, the findings of the REMHI and CEH are incredibly similar, which is a testament to their validity. Francisco Goldman's book, *The Art of Political Murder: Who Killed the Bishop?* (2007), gives an in-depth examination of the events surrounding the government-backed murder of Bishop Gerardi.

<sup>8</sup> See *Memory of Silence: The Guatemalan Truth Commission Report* (2012) edited and translated by Daniel Rothenberg.

deal with Guatemalans, their unique immigrant experience as refugees and exiles the United States, and the circumstances that caused them to flee their home country. In Barrientos' *Family Resemblance*, Nita's parents left in 1963, after the CIA-engineered coup of Jacobo Arbenz in 1954,<sup>9</sup> while Antonio in Tobar's *The Tattooed Soldier* immigrates to the United States in the 1980s, during the worst violence of the civil war<sup>10</sup>.

Tobar's novel was published initially in 1998 by Delphinium Books but was republished in paperback in 2000 through the larger Penguin Group. According to Tobar, an experience shared by a rescue worker served as the basis for the plot: "a social worker at the agency El Rescate told me a story about a client of hers who had spotted a death-squad member in MacArthur Park, which was the central meeting place of L.A.'s Central American community. That anecdote became the germ, many years later, of *The Tattooed Soldier*" (*hectortobar.com*). Thus, Tobar's own experience as the child of Guatemalan immigrants in addition to the experiences he heard about from social workers and those he interviewed as a journalist form the basis of *The Tattooed Soldier*'s fictional world which is based on realism in the service of social justice.

In contrast, *Family Resemblance* is slightly more recent and has a heavily-gendered publishing history. Published by New American Library (NAL) Accent, a

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<sup>9</sup> Jacobo Arbenz was the president of Guatemala from 1952-1954, during which he continued land reforms and other policies initiated by Juan José Arévalo that worked towards fairer distribution of the country's resources. He and his policies were seen as "communist" by the United States when his 1952 Agrarian Reform interfered with the economic interests of United Fruit Company (which had connections with many US elites), thus leading to a US-backed coup in 1954. Thus, he is a leftist hero for many who feel like Guatemala's later political and economic difficulties stem from this US intervention. See Stephen Schlesinger and Stephen Kinzer's *Bitter Fruit: The Untold Story of the American Coup in Guatemala* (1983), Roberto García Ferreira's *La CIA y el caso Arbenz* (2009), and Fernando González Davison's *Oscura transparencia: la caída de Arbenz* (1994) for more on the CIA's involvement and the fall of Arbenz.

<sup>10</sup> This time period is thus often referred to as *la violencia*.

division of Penguin Group, it is the second of Barrientos' novels, but the first revolving around Guatemalans and Guatemalan-Americans. On the page praising her first novel, the publisher describes the purpose of NAL Accent novels as follows: they "touch on subjects close to a woman's heart, from friendship to family to finding our place in the world." *Family Resemblance* is a book club romance in the vein of chica lit. According to Tace Hedrick, chica lit diverges from chick lit through "[its] introduction of an ethnic identity crisis into the romance mix" (342).<sup>11</sup> Hedrick claims that, "part of chica lit's success, as with its related romance and 'chick lit' genres, is that its use of narrative formulae soothes the reader's anxieties; she knows, for example, that each novel will end with a successful heterosexual romance" (342). She continues to say that, "a primary difference from chick lit is chica lit's introduction of an ethnic identity crisis into the romance mix" (Hedrick 342). There are usually two resolutions to chica lit stories, according to Hedrick: proper Americanization (in the form of material success) and "the protagonist's discovery of the 'right' ethnic man" (342). Barrientos does not meet the first required resolution because in many ways, she is already Americanized – indeed, her Americanization *is* the conflict, as will be discussed later in the essay

In accordance with Hedrick's definition of chica lit, *Family Resemblance* comes with a Conversation Guide, which includes an interview with Barrientos about the book and her own connection to it (though she maintains the story is fiction). In addition, the

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<sup>11</sup>I must note that Hedrick points to Alisa Valdés-Rodríguez's *The Dirty Girls Social Club* (2003) as the beginning of the chica lit genre. Barrientos's *Family Resemblance* is also published in 2003, thus perhaps presenting a different model of consumption-driven chica lit, due to the historical specificity of its setting and its reversal of the Americanization resolution.

publisher provides guiding questions for book club discussions “because books, and life, are meant for sharing.” The story revolves around a recently divorced therapist who discovers her family’s immigration story and learns to accept her Guatemalan heritage. There are no academic works that I am aware of that devote any attention to the novel; however, I see it as a useful comparison text for Tobar’s depiction of the trauma of the civil war and Guatemalan-American identity.

#### **BACKGROUND AND PLOT: HECTOR TOBAR’S THE TATTOOED SOLDIER**

*The Tattooed Soldier* is one of the more-oft read (if not *the* most-read) novels by a Central American-American author in academic settings. The story and characters are based on a mix of historical events, personal and family history, and narratives collected during his years as a journalist in Los Angeles. Indeed, Tobar covered the 1992 Los Angeles riots and won a Pulitzer Prize for his contributions to the coverage by the *Los Angeles Times*.<sup>12</sup> His work has a clear ethical imperative, driven by his work as a journalist and desire to share the stories of Guatemalan refugees in Los Angeles. Tobar also uses his own family history. According to his website, Tobar’s father (a member of the Guatemalan army) and grandfather are the inspirations for Sergeant Guillermo Longoria and the protagonist, Antonio Bernal (Tobar, *Translation* 12-13; [hectortobar.com](http://hectortobar.com)). This realist revenge novel, with a dark plot, has no happy ending.

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<sup>12</sup> A problematic award, as Tobar did not agree with the way the rioters were portrayed using his material.



Though studied in the classroom, few academic works have focused primarily on this text.<sup>13</sup>

The plot follows three main characters: Antonio, Sgt. Guillermo Longoria, and Elena. One might identify Antonio as the protagonist of the story, though in many ways he is a bystander to the violence that traumatizes him. When the reader first meets Antonio, he is being evicted from his apartment along with his friend, José Juan, a Mexican economic migrant. Thus, for the entire story he is homeless and prone to bouts of depression due to his trauma. Antonio's wife, Elena, is the most politically active character in the novel (though not with the EGP<sup>14</sup> or other militant guerrilla groups) and introduces Antonio to the ideals of the revolution when they first meet in la Universidad de San Carlos<sup>15</sup>. She is murdered for her activism (the small request for cleaner water and sewage) in the local community, along with her two-year-old son, Carlos, by Sgt. Longoria and his men. Antonio is not at home because of an oversight by Longoria's men even though he was the primary target. As Antonio flees from the village and begins his

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<sup>13</sup> Ana Patricia Rodríguez's *Dividing the Isthmus* (2006) is a notable exception. However, I will not converse with this text as her discussion does not speak directly to questions of Guatemalan-American identity; rather her assertion is that the novel reflects a Mayan cosmovision.

<sup>14</sup> The Guerrilla Army of the Poor, a leftist guerrilla group made more famous worldwide with the publication of indigenous activist, Rigoberto Menchú's *testimonio* in 1983. One of the group's *comandantes*, Gustavo Meoño, who had to live underground in Guatemala City for a large portion of the war, is currently the director of the AHPN. There were a number of other guerrilla groups (militant and not), such as the PGT (and its secondary school arm, the JPT) with great influence in different parts of the countryside. In addition, many guerrilla groups would create larger groups through alliances, as is the case for the URNG, in order to have more influence and pose a greater threat to the repressive military government.

<sup>15</sup> La USAC, Guatemala's sole public university, which during the civil war was considered a sanctuary for leftists, Marxists, unionists, and guerrillas.

immigration to the United States, he sees Longoria nonchalantly eating ice cream and fixates on the yellow jaguar tattoo on his wrist.<sup>16</sup>

Guillermo Longoria's character, is clearly an *indígena*<sup>17</sup> who immigrated to the United States after his time in the *ejército*, or Guatemalan army. He rationalizes his use of murderous force (often against other indigenous communities) as a member of the Jaguar battalion by seeing communism and the ideals of the guerrillas as a kind of contamination that must be eliminated. I would like to note the importance of how Longoria is referenced throughout this paper. I use the last name, Longoria, when discussing his military persona, where his first name is omitted as part of the erasure of his individual personality. However, the name Guillermo retains the humanity that Tobar wants to give him, to let the reader know that he is a deeply traumatized subject who faces his own demons more and more throughout the novel. So I use this name when discussing his pre-army life.

By coincidence, Antonio and Longoria both live in Los Angeles, and one day in MacArthur Park, a popular hangout and family spot for Latinos, Antonio sees him, recognizing his tattoo. Antonio then plans to murder Longoria, though his first attempt in the park is unsuccessful. Longoria has no idea who Antonio is and cannot remember the murders he committed as they blend in with so many other atrocities. However, we see his daily life and how his past invades his present daily life – at work, in his relationship, and at home. At the end of the novel, Longoria is murdered by Antonio and left in an

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<sup>16</sup> This summary is much more streamlined than in the novel, further proof of a structure determined by trauma which will be discussed later in this paper.

<sup>17</sup> The term *indígena* means “indigenous” or “Indian (*indio*)” and often “Maya” (since it is the largest ethnic group in Guatemala). I will explore this term in more detail later in the paper.

underground sewer pipe, though this act does not lead Antonio to feel any sense of closure or healing.

#### **BACKGROUND AND PLOT: TANYA MARIA BARRIENTOS' FAMILY RESEMBLANCE**

As discussed earlier, Barrientos' novel comes out of an imagining of her parents' immigration story. In the Conversation Guide, she claims to know little about the reasons her family left other than that they were "political." She describes her family as "embrac[ing] American culture with gusto" and confesses that she "[doesn't] actually know much about [her] parents' lives in Guatemala." Barrientos admits that she did not want to push them into telling their story as she "didn't want them to feel like [she] was invading their privacy." From this same interview, we know that her father was born in Antigua, Guatemala and "one of [her] grandmothers actually wrote speeches for Jacobo Arbenz" ("A Conversation"). Similar to Tobar, who was born in the United States and whose parents came here in 1960, Barrientos came to the US in the early 1960's at the age of three. Thus, both authors' parents left Guatemala before the worst of the violence, likely aware of the budding civil war. Barrientos chooses to place the trauma related to Guatemalan history in the earlier part of the war, unlike Tobar.

Juanita, who only goes by the more Americanized "Nita," is the protagonist of *Family Resemblance*, and she is the sole narrator (in contrast to Tobar's novel). Though Nita grew up in El Paso, Texas, she lives in Philadelphia and has her own counseling practice. Her father, Diego, a professor of Latin American literature in Texas, has recently suffered a major stroke which requires him to move to Philadelphia. The thrust of the plot begins when a friend of the family finds a cryptic letter from a woman named

Pancha to Nita's deceased mother, Regina. The letter is dated a few days before her mother's death, when she was killed by a common criminal while setting up an exhibit. With the help of two journalists, a long-time (white) friend and Juno, the (Cuban-American) love interest, Nita begins investigating her family history. She meets her aunt, Pancha, who now lives in California, and her *abuela*, Olympia. Pancha is bilingual, but Olympia can only speak Spanish, a language that Nita never learned since her parents pushed her to assimilate entirely to US culture. However, this does not stop Olympia and Nita from forging a bond through their mutual love of knitting.

The reason why Diego and Regina moved to the United States are both searched for and avoided by Nita throughout the story. Ultimately, when the story is revealed, it is one-sided. Because Nita's mother died when Nita was 12 and Diego's stroke has left him unable to communicate effectively, only Pancha, who worked with the right-wing, anti-Arbenz activists after the coup, is able to relate her story to Nita and the reader. Apparently, Diego was a supporter of Arbenz, and, after the coup, he was put on a hit list by the right-wing government. Though Pancha was on the other side politically, she had kept in touch with her friend, Regina (Diego's wife); in collaboration with Olympia, Diego and Regina were able to immigrate to Texas and escape danger. The couple had severed all connections to Guatemala and the bad blood in the family had lingered ever since. However, once the back story to their immigration is revealed, Diego dies and Nita visits Guatemala for the first time in order to spread her father's ashes and attend *Semana Santa* (Holy Week) in Antigua. At the end of the novel, Nita vows to learn Spanish and return to Guatemala. It is also clear that her burgeoning relationship with Juno will

continue, despite her inability to have children. This happily-ever-after ending is in stark contrast to *The Tattooed Soldier*, as the trauma of the civil war is solved by family reconnection, acceptance of one's roots, and (ethnic) romance.

## POSTCOLONIAL TRAUMA THEORY AND ITS APPLICATION TO LATINO/A LITERATURE

There are few, if any, instances where scholars apply trauma theory to Latino/a literature. The posited genre of "postcolonial trauma novels" is highly contested. Though Native American and African American trauma studies have slowly gained steam,<sup>18</sup> the same cannot be said for US Latino/a studies. Recently, there have been attempts to tease out this hostility to literary theory in postcolonial literary studies, such as the 2008 special issue of *Studies in the Novel* and Irene Visser's "Trauma Theory and Postcolonial Literary Studies" (2011). Visser accurately summarizes the issues that scholars of ethnic and third-world literature face in applying trauma theory. First, "In its present definition... [PTSD] is characterized by a lack of coherence and specificity" (272). That is, there are a number of ways that trauma can effect individuals, from repetitive intrusion in dreams or seemingly disconnected daily events to amnesia surrounding the event. Another major issue that needs to be addressed is the western framework of trauma presented, which does not recognize "non-western templates for understanding psychic disorders related to trauma" (Visser 272). The last issue, which I believe is most easily corrected is the "lack of historical particularity", which "sits uneasily with postcolonialism's eponymous focus on historical, political and socio-economic factors in

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<sup>18</sup> For recent work in this area, see *Trauma and Resilience in American Indian and African American Southern History*, Eds. Anthony S. Parent and Ulrike Wiethaus (2013).

the process of colonization and decolonization” (Visser 273). This lack of historicization then leads some scholars to argue that trauma theory always leads to readings that disempower and victimize communities, as seen in LaCapra’s caution that we should not construct “founding traumas;” that is, traumas which make up the foundations of a person or group’s identity (23). LaCapra’s weariness supposes that trauma experienced by ethnic minorities is somehow more likely to homogenize the identity of those in the group than it is for those of the dominant group (who are often the perpetrators), though even the perpetrators can be tied to founding traumas; take for example, German identity and the Holocaust.

In relation to this historicity issue, scholars’ concern over trauma studies comes from the historical particularity of its “birth.” Initial research in the 1990s focused intensely on the Holocaust by way of Cathy Caruth, Michael Rothberg, Dominick LaCapra, and Dan Bar-On. The first studies of trauma focused on Holocaust survivors and succeeding generations, but later studies also included German perpetrators and the generations after. This research helped make it clear that intense and unthinkable personal and historical experience of the murder of more than six million Jewish, Roma, and homosexual people, among other minority groups, had a profound effect on the identity of the victim and perpetrator. However, these studies problematically equalized the traumatic effects of the perpetrator and those upon whom violence was perpetrated. While trauma theory has now been applied to many different experiences, such as post-apartheid South Africa, genocide and Native displacement in the Americas, and US slavery, its beginning in Holocaust studies caused trauma theory to be under-theorized in

an anti-imperialist or postcolonial context. Scholars, such as Robert Eaglestone, have suggested that trauma theory should really be called “Holocaust theory,” as trauma theory traces its origins there and thus is historically stuck there (35). The establishment of Israel and its colonization (and continued occupation) of Palestine as a response to the Holocaust means that theorizing trauma in a postcolonial setting may be untenable if it remains stuck in a Holocaust historicization.<sup>19</sup>

We should remember that problematizing a concept is not the same thing as repairing it or improving it. While postcolonial literary scholars are quick to point out the obstacles, they offer few concrete suggestions for how to re-think trauma in a way that can empower communities and survivors. Trauma occurs to those in “the West” and in “the East,” in the Global North and Global South. And while we obviously must question a singular definition of trauma and its effects, the ambiguity of PTSD which Visser attacks actually opens up multiple definitions of trauma. Indeed, few would argue that witnessing the murder of your wife and child, as Antonio does, or being forced into exile, cutting off all ties to friends, family, and country, as Nita’s parents do, is not traumatizing. As Sam Durrant suggests, “Postcolonial narrative, which addresses the individual reader both in his or her singularity and as a member of wider communities, is caught between these two commitments; its transformation of the past into a narrative is simultaneously an attempt to summon the dead and lay them to rest” (9).

Though this paper likely cannot escape the consequences that the one-size-fits-all model of trauma theory developed by Holocaust studies entail, I hope that by placing the

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<sup>19</sup> See also *World Memory: Personal Trajectories in Global Time*, Eds. Jill Bennett and Rosanne Kennedy Basingstoke (2003) for a collection of essays that further explores this concept.

Tobar and Barrientos's novels in the historical reality of the Guatemalan civil war and diaspora, reading the trauma in these novels as more than just community disempowerment, and analyzing based on the traumas presented rather than pre-scripted expectations for what a trauma narrative 'looks like,' that the text can speak to the trauma rather than trauma theory speaking for the text. In the next section, I present Franz Fanon as the postcolonial trauma theorist best suited to this work.

### **FANON AND THE GUATEMALAN CIVIL WAR AS COLONIAL VIOLENCE**

“In the words of one survivor, Javier Sicilia, ‘A victim is someone who has come back from death to a world where they don’t fully belong.’”

– Guatemala Human Rights Commission E-mail, 18 April 2013

This quotation, sent in an advocacy E-mail mere days before the genocide trial against Ríos Montt was placed in limbo, reflects the out-of-place and out-of-time feeling that comes from experiencing violent trauma. Survivors cannot see the world in the same way and the world cannot see the survivor in the same way either, which may be why so many trauma victims stay silent about the incident. Thus, to discuss the trauma of the Guatemalan civil war period, we must place it in context of Fanon's research into the connections between structural and punctual traumas in a psychoanalytical and colonial framework. As Derek Hook and Ross Truscott note, “Fanon's unorthodox borrowings from the history of psychoanalytic thought means that his is a strategic utilization of its concepts in order to produce a set of transformative theorizations” (162).

Trauma has been explored predominantly in psychoanalytical terms, with its growth being generally attributed to Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience* (1995). Indeed, she begins her study of trauma with Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and his reading of



Tancred's killing of Clorinda in *Gerusalemme Liberata* (Caruth 2-3). Although most trauma theory has its foundations in Freud, most postcolonial theorists actively reject Freudian ideas because they lack historicity, as discussed earlier<sup>20</sup>. The focus on the individual and inability to historicize create problems for recognizing the colonialism inherent within many psychoanalytic readings. In addition, one could then argue that psychoanalysis cannot proficiently handle the colonialist aspect of trauma, especially in the case of indigenous people, the targets of civil war violence in Guatemala. However, Franz Fanon, a psychoanalyst himself, presents the intersection of the analysis of trauma through both individual psychology and the collective experience of colonialism. I argue that Fanon's work in the 1950s and 1960s is still foundational to the application of trauma theory to postcolonial narratives, since he recognizes the balance of individual and community in the postcolonial trauma narrative and by offering psychoanalysis as "both instrument and object of postcolonial critique" (Hook and Truscott 156).

Guatemala's historical situation is characterized by both the experience of punctual traumas, individual experiences such as being tortured by the military, and by structural trauma, traumatic experiences built in to the framework of society. Colonialism is a structural trauma. As Fanon states: "For colonialism has not simply depersonalized the individual it has colonized; this depersonalization is equally felt in the collective sphere, on the level of social structures" (*Wretched of the Earth* 293). The colonial experience of Guatemala and the further internal colonization of indigenous peoples there

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<sup>20</sup> Celia Brickman's *Aboriginal Populations in the Mind* (2003) in particular links the continuing use of terms such as "savage" in the discourse of clinical psychoanalysis to a refusal to see historical significance in the terms.

represent this structural trauma in the Guatemalan context. A history of these two types of colonialism grounds my reading of the traumas of the civil war in *The Tattooed Soldier* and *Family Resemblance*.

Fanon, in *Black Skins, White Masks* (1952), states, “Hatred is not a given; it is a struggle to acquire hatred, which has to be dragged into being, clashing with acknowledged guilt complexes. Hatred cries to exist, and he who hates must prove his hatred through action and the appropriate behavior. In a sense he has to embody *hatred*” (35). This reflection on hatred exemplifies Longoria in *The Tattooed Soldier* and the treatment of indigenous Guatemalan peoples in both novels. Though *Family Resemblance* has only two brief references to the ‘Mayan Indians,’ her description takes common stereotypes and images of *los pueblos mayas* and internalizes the disgust for their existence – a reflection of the colonialism that lives on through common sayings such as, “Mejor pobre que indio (Better to be poor than an Indian).”

Though Barrientos’ work says much through the absence of indigenous characters, Fanon’s insights, more concerned with the masculine, may be more pertinent to Tobar’s novel, which explores identity and the struggle against colonial violence and trauma mainly through men’s eyes. The colonial violence is particularly clear in Longoria’s case. Guillermo’s inability to lose his brutal lack of compassion throughout the novel demonstrates the extent to which colonized people can internalize behaviors that harm their own communities. Guillermo’s trauma is doubled; as an indigenous boy, he is forced to become a ladino man. Even further, he must inflict death and torture on his own indigenous communities as well as the ladino community that he is forced to inhabit.

Yet, it does not seem like Guillermo “[is] forced to come up against [him]self” or “discover the kernel of that hatred of self which is characteristic of racial conflicts in segregated societies” (Fanon, *Wretched* 309). Indeed, Guillermo sees the war as a zero-sum game: “All this sympathy for the corpses irritated him... all these people seemed to think they had a monopoly on grief. What about Sergeant Longoria? If he hadn’t killed, he might be dead himself. So he would be thankful for being alive” (Tobar, *Tattooed Soldier* 169-170). He does not identify himself any longer as an indigenous person and does not recognize that the hatred of himself and his own people has destroyed his soul and the lives of so many Guatemalans.

The gendering of trauma is something that is also apparent in an analysis of *The Tattooed Soldier* and *Family Resemblance*. For example, Elena’s experience actively advocating for the poor indigenous community in San Cristóbal leads to the Guatemalan government targeting Antonio and his family. However, she is able to engage in her individual activism (she never works to organize the community) longer than others because of the lack of agency ascribed to her. The officials to whom she sends her advocacy letters instead blame Antonio for his inability to control Elena’s actions: “He said, ‘Control your wife. Control her or both of you will be in grave danger’” (Tobar, *Tattooed Soldier* 134). Unlike Antonio, Elena works to improve Guatemala. Her actions, however, are interpreted as “‘gathering intelligence’... About the war” (134). Elena’s story has some interesting parallels to the murder of one of Grupo de Apoyo Mutuo

(GAM) founder, Rosario Godoy de Cuevas.<sup>21</sup> She too had her two-year-old son murdered (just as Carlos is in Tobar's novel) and ultimately, her murder was a result of organizing against government-sponsored disappearances.

The reality of the Guatemalan civil war is that women and children, whether activist or not, were subjected to just as many traumatic events as men did, such as rape and child kidnapping by the military (as Longoria's mother experienced), and were murdered just as frequently, particularly in indigenous communities. Unfortunately, Fanon's theoretical perspective is well-known for its dubious reflections on women<sup>22</sup> and neither Tobar nor Barrientos spend much time on the traumatic experiences of indigenous women. I offer the discussion of chica lit's gendered generic devices as a corrective to the masculinist slant of Fanon's work. Barrientos's use of chica lit tropes show a different way of having her predominately female characters work through the trauma of the Guatemalan diaspora.

When considering the traumas I discuss in the context of Tobar's and Barriento's novels, we recognize a foundation for all of their punctual and structural, intergenerational traumas: a life-changing act saturated in silence, "indescribable and undiscussable" as Bar-On argues in *The Indescribable and Undiscussable: Reconstructing Human Discourse After Trauma* (1999). In this context, the horrific events of the Guatemalan civil war are spoken and silenced in different ways by Tobar and Barrientos, due to their own roles as witnesses to their parents' and other refugees'

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<sup>21</sup> You can find documents about the horrific 1985 event in the National Security Archives and in numerous Americas Watch reports from the time period, such as *Guatemala, Getting Away with Murder* (1991).

<sup>22</sup> Compare Chapters 2 and 3 of *Black Skins, White Mask* and his treatment of relationships of black men and white women and black women with white men.

experiences. Indeed, these stories are concerned with “a kind of double telling, the oscillation between a *crisis of death* and the correlative *crisis of life*: between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival” (Caruth 7). As both stories seem to be told in fragments (though Tobar’s more so than Barrientos’s), they constantly are torn between the past, the present, and how both of those impinge on the imagining of the future, both individually but also for displaced Guatemalans, whether exiles or refugees, as a collective.

### **REPRESENTING/ROMANTICIZING TRAUMA**

“The word peace must mean to forget.”

– a K’iche’ woman in Providence, Rhode Island (Foxen 230)

In literary studies, the problem of trauma is located both in its representation and how it represents the traumatized figure. As Caruth states, “trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual’s past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely *not known* in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor” (4). This haunting, I believe, can be even more pronounced in those who were not present at the original act, as is the case for Antonio and Nita, but also for the authors, Tobar and Barrientos. In addition, the trauma of colonial violence (felt so strongly in Longoria’s story) adds an additional layer to this haunting.

Part of representing the traumas of the civil war comes from the author’s personal experiences and knowledge about the period and the diaspora it created. Tobar must place his work in the context of being taught to love the opportunities available in the United States but hate its imperialist attitude: “I learned very quickly that being a good and

studious *guatemalteco*, dedicated to honoring the memory of El Che, also happened to make me a good ‘American’ in a traditional, Norman Rockwell sense of the word” (*Translation Nation* 14; 15). Tobar, then, indirectly knows but did not directly experience the trauma of the Guatemalan civil war. He does know the challenge of being an immigrant, of the contradictory nature of being *guatemalteco*, anti-imperialist, and American. In addition to his journalism background and interviews with refugees, Tobar also claims to be of *campesino*, or peasant, blood (*Translation Nation* 12). The class description leaves ethnic ambiguity, both in his own origin story but also as a concept within the novel.

Barrientos, on the other hand, writes even further removed from the experiences of others affected by the diaspora. She bears witness, but to a family trauma she can only feel, does not know in words, and has not directly experienced. Since she is unaware of her parents’ immigration story, she bears witness to an imaginary, idealized immigration story. Similarly, Nita’s identity is more intricately tied to a *lack* of knowledge of the trauma – of being removed from it, from its absence. This causes her to *romanticize*, rather than *represent* her trauma, therefore focusing on this terrifying time period more as plot point than a reality. Although she represents the ambivalent feeling that one may have for the Marxists and right-wing/military government, she does so by draining the event of any moral grounding, thus forgiving the actions of Pancha and those who facilitated the 36-year “bloodbath” that followed. Indeed, there is no active Guatemalan perpetrator because “[they] aren’t the ones who overthrew Arbenz. America did that” (Barrientos, *Family* 210).

Both novels are characterized by fragmented stories, similar to the cases presented by Fanon in *Wretched of the Earth*. Though Fanon presents the cases in “Colonial War and Mental Disorders” in a linear way, he emphasizes that the stories are not presented as a coherent narrative: “Identifying his problems were laborious, but after several days we managed to reconstruct his story” (187). The constant use of flashbacks within *The Tattooed Soldier* is particularly concerned with the need to reconstruct the narrative of the trauma. Part One deals primarily with Antonio. Indeed, we get the story of when he discovers his dead wife’s body and sees the man who killed them. This is as much as he knows of Elena and Carlos’s murders. In Part One, there is also narration which explains how Guillermo became Sgt. Longoria through a raid/kidnapping<sup>23</sup> as a teenager from a theater near his *pueblo* (*Tattooed Soldier* 34-37). In Part Two, the majority of the narration takes the point-of-view of Elena, with some time spent in Antonio and Guillermo’s eyes at the end. Elena’s story begins when she meets Antonio for the first time. Her story begins to overlap with Sgt. Longoria’s when he comes to kill Antonio (who, due to the incompetence of Longoria’s henchmen, is not present). Thus, we get the perspective of the perpetrator and the perpetrated upon in the central trauma of the novel. Part Three has far fewer Antonio flashbacks and more flashbacks focused on Guillermo. For Guillermo, the riots also bring flashbacks of Guatemala (272).

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<sup>23</sup> This, in itself, makes it very clear that Guillermo is indigenous. Laws were enacted that mandated indigenous men serve in the Guatemalan army; however, forced conscription of under-age boys was widespread. “As one ladino state worker said, ‘If it weren’t for the Indians, there would be no army. No city ladino would allow their child to be grabbed, and no ladino schoolboy from the capital could survive the training’” (qtd. in Nelson 16). This was an excellent way to destroy indigenous communities without razing them to the ground. As will be discussed further in this paper, the anti-*indígena* culture of the army and the violence they had to enact against other indigenous peoples was a way to erase ladino/*indígena* identifications and institute a *guatemalteco* identity.

In *Family Resemblance*, Nita is the only narrator of the story; however, she often drifts off to memories of her mother (especially around the time of her death) and her father before his stroke. In addition, the “true” story of why Nita’s parents came to the United States is resisted; Pancha offers fragments but Nita constantly rejects her rendering of the trauma and runs away. In addition, as discussed above, even the full story is only Pancha’s retelling of it. Nita’s father, Diego, is unable to present his story due to the effects of his stroke. The language barrier with Olympia also presents a barrier for the narrator, who cannot speak Spanish. Pancha’s story is never fully explained (it revolves around Nita’s father and not Pancha’s experience and activism), and since she was a right-wing, anti-guerrillero, the full story of the traumatic event can never be presented. This complicates the narrative for Nita because “the victim also has a duty to the dead to remember past atrocities, and so trauma assumes a memorial function” (Ward 178). However, how can Nita memorialize an incomplete, likely unreliable story?

Through Pancha’s eyes, the reader sees Guatemala and Guatemalans as victims, “pawns in a power struggle that had nothing to do with us” (Barrientos, *Family* 210). Like Tobar’s depiction of Longoria, Pancha is also portrayed as human and does “normal” things like yoga. If Longoria sees the army as an attempt to stop the infection and contamination of society, Pancha sees her right-wing group as one “that saw what was coming and tried to do what we could to keep it from turning into a bloodbath” (210). By depicting the right-wing, anti-Arbenz movement in such a sympathetic (and disempowered) light, the reader is presented with the claim that the civil war was



nobody's<sup>24</sup> fault. She ascribes no responsibility to the right-wing authority that took over the governing of Guatemala. Indeed, unlike Tobar, who humanizes the people within the army and government, but not the army and government itself, Barrientos portrays post-coup Guatemala as inevitably violent and morally relativistic. When Nita asks, "So who was good and who was bad?" Pancha's response portrays a lack of reflection, "The only place that sort of thing is clear is in church" (210). Pancha's description of the trauma is, at its foundation, a broken social contract, as revealed here: "We weren't the only family that was split apart, Nita. It was a horrible time when nobody knew who to trust. Talking to the wrong people could get you killed.... We had no idea which police officers or schoolteachers or even priests were spies" (211). It is telling that Pancha must go back on her previous statement that the church is the only place for moral judgment, as she demonstrates that even religious practitioners were implicated in *la violencia*.

Indeed, Barrientos portrays the trauma of post-coup Guatemala as able to reach beyond national borders. Though there is no clear evidence that Nita's mother's death is connected to events in Guatemala, I could not shake the feeling that it was no coincidence that Regina died only a few days after she attempted to reestablish ties with Pancha and the rest of her family in Guatemala. In fact, Nita's father blames himself for the mother's death and sees it as karma, perhaps even as an inability to escape the aura of death that surrounds Guatemalan society and the lie, told to US immigration authorities, that he was not a Marxist (204). The choice to become an exile from Guatemalan society and from family haunts Nita's father and the narrative.

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<sup>24</sup> Or at the very least, it was not Guatemala's fault.

The story of Lopez, Longoria's buddy in the Jaguar Battalion reflects the traumas that haunt the soldiers of the civil war. Despite being a clean, well-adjusted military man, his own son's death (by gang members at school) triggers life-impairing PTSD symptoms, which had already physically manifested when he admits to having abused his wife (who then leaves him). The incident mirrors the treatment of Guatemalan families whose relatives disappeared, as "they didn't let [Lopez] see the body."<sup>25</sup> He was just lying there in the playground for an hour" (197). As Lopez continues to rant, he clearly makes the connection between his son's tragic death and the atrocities he committed in the Jaguar Battalion: "I saw him and it was like all these things I'd seen before. I started to remember all these things... and now I can't forget" (198). Lopez conflates the murders he committed in Guatemala with his son's death, allowing his shame and guilt to break free. Longoria is scared that Lopez's fear, guilt, and depression may infect him and cause him to "los[e] control," so he cuts ties with him hastily (198). The triggering of Lopez's traumatic symptoms and his pathetic and incredibly overt experience of this pain reflects Homi Bhabha's reflection in *The Location of Culture*: "Remembering is never a quiet act of introspection or retrospection. It is a painful re-membering, a putting together of the dismembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present" (63). This relates to Lopez's loss and on-set of mental illness just as much as it does to Antonio's constant melancholia and his currently-lived traumas of homelessness, undocumented status, and isolation.

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<sup>25</sup> There are still thousands of families who have never seen the bodies of their relatives. In addition, the Patrullas de Acción Civil (PAC's) and National Police would often leave bodies in public places (like the public university, la Universidad de San Carlos) to be discovered, in order to send a message to the community.

As the novel goes on, Guillermo begins to have breakdowns similar to Lopez, though his internalization of the hatred of his own people that Fanon theorizes and the constant threat of ‘communists,’ prevents him from speaking his anguish aloud. For instance, after Antonio’s first attempt to kill him, Guillermo calls his girlfriend, Reginalda, and gets into an argument. He asks himself:

Who was the man in the park [Antonio] and what did he have in common with Reginalda? They both looked at him as if he were less than human, seeing something that he was sure wasn’t there... Longoria felt limp, as if all the wind has left him. Years of trying to be strong, of holding himself up against everything. His legs buckled....

For the first time in his life he wept in front of a woman. (212)

Guillermo, unfortunately, does not recognize (or at least, represses) the excellent reasons for considering him ‘less than human.’ His mind then floods with memories that obviously have haunted him: “If he could find the words he would tell her.... what he has seen in Guatemala, what he had been forced to do in that first village on a Sunday, on a market day. He would tell her about the rooms where they held the prisoners, rooms at the barracks of Huehuetenango, Totonicapán, El Quiché” (213). Unfortunately, he never does find the words for Reginalda, and thus is able to live without sharing these traumas with any of the characters in the novel, only the reader. By maintaining this façade to the public and all the other characters (such as Antonio and Lopez), he is able to maintain in his mind and to the outside world that, “in years of battle he had never been wounded” (296).

### **EXILE, REFUGEE, OR IMMIGRANT?**

The protagonists of *The Tattooed Soldier* and *Family Resemblance* form their identities as Guatemalan-American, to varying degrees, around traumas surrounding the Guatemalan armed conflict and diaspora. However, Antonio and Nita are also affected by other structural violence (treatment of the homeless, racism) and punctual traumas (illness and death in the family, divorce) that are connected to but also separate from events in Guatemala.

But how do these analyses build a case for Guatemalan-American fiction as refugee literature? It matters how we refer to the members of the Guatemalan diaspora. First, we must define three important terms: exile, refugee, and immigrant. In Latino/a studies, the Cuban community is often considered an exile community (or at least, that is how many Cubans view themselves). Being an exile carries a class and power dynamic; exiles in general held some positions in the power structure of the society and generally benefitted from the communities they came from. Thus, when society changes, as it did in Cuba or after the Sandinista Revolution in Nicaragua, the right-wing and upper-class left the country but often had somewhere stable to go, either through family or class connections. There may also be the hope that one can return someday (similar to the immigrant narratives that have a fantasy of return). Nita's family in *Family Resemblance* is in a state of exile; Pancha and Olympia use their connections to help move Nita's parents to the United States and find Diego a job as a professor in a Texas university.

A refugee also flees the country, but often because they have no choice and are part of a disempowered class (economic, racial, or other marginalized group) in society. One becomes a refugee through forced migration, due to factors such as threats of

violence, consequences of massacres or other experiences of community loss, or economic necessity. The migration process is not easy; there are few if any connections to build upon and refugees often migrate without documentation. Refugees, under international law, have the right to petition for recognition and be provided with support from signatories to 1951 United Nations Convention relating to the Status of Refugees<sup>26</sup>. Antonio is a refugee since he flees Guatemala to avoid his own death, though unfortunately, “he had neglected his application for political asylum, ignoring the pleas of the caseworker at the Central American Refugee Center... Dispirited by the never-ending immigration paper chase” (Tobar, *Tattooed Soldier* 52).

Refugee status differs from being an immigrant in that immigration is much broader. Within the traditional Latino/a immigrant narrative, the American Dream, where migrants come for opportunity and freedom, is central. The refugee narrative does not focus on this; it is more concerned with safety and loss and the complete lack of choice that led to the refugee’s departure from his home country. However, the refugee story is often submerged into the prevalence of the Latino/a immigrant narrative, thus flattening out difference. This feeling reflects Arias’s conclusions on the invisibility of Central American-Americans and their culture: “Often in denial of their own being, in the cultural context of the United States, the experience of the polysemic words *exile*, *border*, and *diaspora* ring very different bells for them than they do for those who are part of a more individualized migration” (189). Claudia Milian suggests that Latino/a people are “the freak problem.” In *Latining America*, Milian takes the DuBoisian question, “how

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<sup>26</sup> Unfortunately, the United States were not nearly as proactive in helping Central American refugees from Guatemala or El Salvador during the internal armed conflicts as these refugees deserved.

does it feel to be a problem?” and applies it to Latinness. She suggests that Latino/as are further seen as ‘freak’ problems, “something outside the grasp of America [...] freaks of an un-Americanized nature” (57). I would go further and say that for Guatemalan refugees, part of the “freakery” is related to their inability to fit into a traditional Latino/a Americanization storyline.

This is why Antonio finds it difficult to fit into the immigrant imaginary. His inability to connect to his Mexican friend shows that he cannot be an immigrant because of his Guatemalan-ness. In this light, the reason for Antonio’s “confusing melancholia” is his inability to connect with his Mexican friend, José Juan, apparent in his spells of depression which frustrate and cement for the reader the difference between Antonio and his friend’s experience (Arias 187). “Antonio ignored José Juan... He had forgotten something, and this had triggered another one of his famous depressions. [...] *¿Qué te pasa?* José Juan asked.... Snap out of it. *No te agüites*. I hate it when you get like this” (*Tattooed Soldier* 39-40). The use of a predominately Mexican Spanish phrase “*No te agüites*” draws the contrast between a Mexican immigrant and Guatemalan refugee identity. When José Juan leaves in frustration, he demonstrates his inability to understand the specificity of Antonio’s experience. Unlike José Juan who came here for economic prosperity, Antonio is a refugee who did not have much choice in becoming an immigrant.

The only character (besides, perhaps, Sgt. Longoria) who wordlessly seems to understand and accept Antonio despite “hav[ing] too much pride” is one of the restaurant owners he worked for in the past. The narrator explains the connection as one between

survivors of structural trauma: “Mr. Finkel was a Polish Jew, and seemed to recognize something in Antonio, the face of concealed trauma, perhaps, the disoriented, resentful eyes of the exile” (*Tattooed Soldier* 53). Tobar links the communal trauma of the Guatemalan civil war with that of the Holocaust. Mr. Finkel sees Antonio as a fellow exile and also as one who has had to repress his trauma to friends and US society itself. This attempt to conceal comes out in the act of having too much pride – the desire to appear “normal” like José Juan and other immigrants who come to the United States for “opportunity.” Ultimately, Mr. Finkel recognizes Antonio’s fragmentation.

This concept of “broken-ness” pervades both *The Tattooed Soldier* and *Family Resemblance* in different ways. For Tobar, all his characters express different forms of feeling broken, reacting to the same historical trauma of the civil war: Elena wants to take action, Antonio is hopeless and wants revenge, Longoria see the world through the lens of infection and cannot love. For Barrientos, her divorce has broken her and indeed, the acknowledgment of her connection to Guatemala is portrayed as something that can break her. Thus, Barrientos’ adherence to the constraints of the chica lit genre is used both to assuage the anxiety of the Guatemalan exile experience while at the same time, the historical specificity of the Central American-American experience of invisibility undermines the genre. Just as chica lit “advocate[s] an individual, rather than structural, approach to ethnic poverty,” Barrientos advocates an individual reclamation of Guatemala, which ignores the structural systems and institutions which have led to her diasporic identity (Hedrick 345). However, her reclamation of her Guatemalan heritage is still a subversion of the common trope in chica lit of renouncing communities (ex.

working-class, poor community) with Latino/a, Chicano/a, or Mexican-American culture by instead having her embrace her hyphenated identity.

The characteristic need to reject “the presumed values and lives, particularly of poor and working-class Latin American and United States Latinos/as” sets Nita up as classic chica lit protagonist (Hedrick 345). Nita must start as the Latina who rejects identity politics in order to become the Latina who reclaims her roots. Throughout most of the novel, she rejects the idea that Latinas must ‘stick together.’ Nita has spent her life wanting to stay away from what she considers “separatist” Latinas; she actively works to undermine the stereotype that all Latinas speak Spanish and come from working-class families. Since she has never felt anything but American, adding a hyphen by being Guatemalan-American would create a literal fracture in her identity. She does not feel Guatemalan because she does not have the historical or structural knowledge (of the civil war, of *ladino/indígena* relations, etc.). Once she does accept her Guatemalan-ness, she decides to lump herself in with other Latina immigrants, due to the general invisibility of Central American culture in the United States and the loss of her parents, who can no longer pass on Guatemalan traditions and heritages.

Barrientos encompasses the challenges of US identity politics through this section of *Family Resemblance*:

When I was little, [my mother] told me there was no use in dwelling on the past. She said that if you spent too much time looking back, all you’d ever see is what could have been. Even as a kid, I knew that when she spoke like that she was talking about Guatemala, and of course I believed her. Partly because neither she nor my father had ever offered more than the barest details about their lives before coming to America, and partly because whatever happened to them there didn’t seem to matter much anymore. (28)



As Arias has asserted, immigrants from Guatemala have worked hard to “invisibilize” themselves and their children (186). Nita reflects Arias’ claim that Central American-Americans work to deny their own special experience as refugees: “yet this group does not build on its victimization to create an identity in this country or to obtain any recognition or privileges.... Therefore, its fractured identity dissolves into nothingness, and Central American-Americans end up living not only between borders, but also between identities” (189). Indeed, both Antonio and Nita live between the refugee status they are entitled to and the traditional immigrant label that others ascribe to them. Barrientos navigates this issue by using *Family Resemblance* as a way of trying to join the Latina literary canon.

However, she does fulfill the second goal of *chica lit*, which actually part of what the story argues is Nita’s acceptance of her Guatemalan roots. She chooses a brown man so the reader can be sure that he will teach her all she lost about being Latina and maintain her status as a woman of color. For example, Nita is attracted to Juno as an exotic Latino but repelled by the possibility that he is “one of those minorities who waves his cultural credentials around like a battle flag....those types in college, always pestering [her] to join the Latino association of this and the Latin American council of that” (Barrientos, *Family* 93; other examples of this idea can be seen on pages 18 and 33). During sex, Juno’s use of Spanish is fetishized and viewed as part of his exotic appeal; but after, Nita makes it clear that she only wants Spanish to be something practiced in a moment of passion: “Last night I loved hearing Juno speak Spanish as his passion built.... But that was a private pleasure. A moment in time. I’ve never been called Juanita

in the real world, and I don't intend to start now" (93). Nita projects the anger of losing her mother tongue in addition to projecting her guilt and envy of Juno's connection to his Cuban culture onto Juno and 'separatist' Latino/as. In many chicanita lit novels, it matters that Mr. (Ethnically) Right speak Spanish, as the protagonist usually cannot; this is the case for Nita as well (Hedrick 348).

In the end, Nita accepts the value in reclaiming her culture, and not only through her relationship with Juno. When Nita goes with Pancha and Olympia to spread her father's ashes in Guatemala, she recognizes her own deep-seeded desire to be Guatemalan. Nita thinks,

Like black snowflakes the ashes sift into the stream... A few stray flakes land at my feet and I bend down to touch them. First with one finger, and then with all five, I rub the dirt until the ashes have dissolved. With tears streaming down my face, I place my other hand on the ground and begin to wash my hands with the cool, dark soil. I rub it deep into my skin, hoping some of it will seep into my blood. (246)

Though the ashes are Diego's, they have a symbolic meaning connected to the civil war: the ashes of the government's scorched earth policy. The narrator makes this connection to include Diego as a victim of this policy; though he obviously was not killed in massacres such as Dos Erres<sup>27</sup>, he did lose his family, his revolutionary dreams, and his country because of the armed conflict. In addition, Nita not only desires to absorb the land by rubbing it 'deep into her skin;' she also wants the identity of *guatemalteca* along with it. She promises Olympia that she will return and that she will learn Spanish and try

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<sup>27</sup> A massacre carried out by the Guatemalan army which resulted in more than 200 deaths and even a recently-publicized case of child kidnapping, where a 3-year-old was forcibly taken by one of the perpetrators (see *This American Life*'s segment on *Finding Oscar*).

to reclaim what was lost by her forced American assimilation. Nita can recognize herself as part of Guatemalan diasporic community in the US.

The refugee experience complicates immigration in both novels, though I argue that Barrientos' story is more concerned with fitting into the chicanita lit genre. Barrientos portrays her father's naturalization process as difficult. The interrogatory nature of the process and her father's lie about his ties to Marxism impress themselves on Nita's memory (*Family* 36-39). Nita recalls how she had idealized naturalization and then realizes how different the reality is: "I imagined there would be a brass band on hand to play the 'Star-Spangled Banner' as the three of us stood at attention with our hands over our hearts," but instead the INS is a "cavernous office" that "looked like a bank" (36). As Nita imagines a celebration of freedom, the actual experience is protected, vault-like, and intimidating.

Tobar's discussion of immigration, like Barrientos's, revolves around the INS and "legality." Antonio describes his experience as one of pointlessness: "Dispirited by the never-ending immigration paper chase, he had allowed his tourist visa to expire, slipping into the caste of 'illegals,' the *indocumentados*" (*Tattooed Soldier* 52). Unlike Antonio, who is clearly too traumatized to go through the process of getting legal status as a refugee, Nita's parents take special pains to erase their former lives through naturalization. Nita's parents never allow any pain or homesickness for Guatemala to escape because they see being American as the ultimate goal, the way to gain closure for their losses. For Antonio, this is not the case. He cannot let go of Guatemala and being 'legal' is only pertinent in an economic sense because being 'illegal' causes him to

“[settle] for jobs that were clearly beneath him” (Tobar, *Tattooed Soldier* 52). By labeling herself as an immigrant, Nita and her family can see a way out; for Antonio, his unrecognized refugee status is only a constant reminder of home.

This inability to erase Antonio’s refugee status is what causes the much more sobering conclusion to *The Tattooed Soldier*. By ending the novel in the aftermath of the 1992 Los Angeles riots, Tobar brings the problems of inequity and ethnic strife to the United States. In addition, since Antonio is already aware of (and scarred by) his Guatemalan identity, his happily-ever-after cannot come from embracing it. Like the guerrillas and Latin American revolutionaries, the rioters believe, in Antonio’s mind, that violence (“Smash, smash, smash”) can lead to the phrase, “We are free” (306). However, he returns to a famous Che Guevara quote that his wife had introduced him to: “*The revolutionary is guided in all his actions by great feelings of love*” (306). Antonio imagines Elena as a true revolutionary, one who “had studied and thought about these questions of love and revolution and had given her life in search of the answers” (306-307). The narrator suggests that Elena is the model Guatemalan citizen. Of course, this does not really answer the question of what it means to be Guatemalan refugee. Or perhaps it does, by suggesting that Guatemalan-Americans try to function in the American world while never forgetting (or never being able to forget) the past or their desire for a better Guatemala.

In the context of an event like the Guatemalan armed conflict, a refugee narrative recognizes that the traumatic events are not only perpetrated by a Guatemalan history of impunity and dictatorship but also in US foreign policy abuses. This is an additional

burden to working through the violence experienced in the civil war, the immigration process, and establishment of a new life in the United States.

## CONCLUSIONS

Ultimately, Tobar presents a story about the Guatemalan diaspora, told through an interplay of fiction and reality. Tobar does not attempt to present a traditional Latino/a narrative or to tie the Guatemalan diasporic experience to an overarching history of Latin American and Latino immigrants. However, this is intentional; as a group that has been ‘invisibilized,’ to stand out and claim that the Guatemalan diasporic experience is meaningful, their trauma real, and their experiences different to other US Latino/as in important ways *matters*. Latino/a, and especially Chicano/a literature, has ignored Central American-Americans because their immigration (and colonization) story is not the Mexican story; their ties to the US are different<sup>28</sup>. In this way, Tobar initiates a tradition of Guatemalan diasporic authors who can offer a distinct voice in Latino/a literature.

Barrientos, on other hand, presents a more mixed result in *Family Resemblance*. The novel’s generic constraints (likely due to the market pressures of NAL Accent) both pushes the Guatemalan diasporic story to conform to the traditional Latino/a narrative while also proving that it cannot conform to this narrative through the failure to attain both of the common resolutions as put forth by Tace Hedrick: Americanization and an ethnic romance. As chica lit, the trauma of the 1954 coup and the terrible events that

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<sup>28</sup> This is not a value judgment or competition, arguing that one group’s trauma or colonization experience is worse. What I am saying is, the attempt to conflate Chican@ and Guatemalan-American/immigrant experience ends up making Guatemalan-Americans (and of course, other Central American-Americans) invisible in the Latino/a experience.

proceeded it become mere plot points, a way to give more depth to Nita and allow her to “discover” her ethnic identity, rejecting the Americanized success story imposed on her by her parents and reclaiming her lost Guatemalan-ness. This may be why, although the storyline revolves around the 1954 coup and subsequent civil war, so little time is spent on the specifics. The attempt to fit into the traditional Latina narrative fails to encompass the historical specificity of the Guatemalan diasporic experience. Barrientos had the opportunity to offer the perspective of Guatemalan exile but rather works to become part of the larger Latina narrative. However, her reversal of the *chica lit* storyline, moving from Americanization to Guatemala-ization, subverts this genre in a powerful way.

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